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Visual Rhetoric: A Critical Practice in Image Communication

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Visual Rhetoric: A Critical Practice in Image Communication

by

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Report

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Dedication

For my family.

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Abstract

Visual Rhetoric: A Critical Practice in Image Communication

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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This report provides an understanding of the complexities involved in communicating through imagery. I've asserted in my research that the dissemination of images has changed significantly because of recent digital technologies. Social networking, in particular, has allowed for an intertextual web of communication to be created by exponentially increasing the visibility of images. By bringing these recent developments into my work, my design practice has focused on advancing social and political equality by exploiting digital reproduction. As part of my toolbox in image communication, the report focuses intently on two general methods of production: image-text relationships and visual tropes. By using these methods, I have been able to establish a critical practice that highlights the most recent possibilities in advancing social and political equality in the age of digital reproduction.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

INTRODUCTION

Concerned with the structures, signs, and codes that construct our visual culture, visual rhetoric has been my primary focus in graduate school, and has ultimately shaped my practice as a graphic designer. I've selected the image as a point of greater inquiry in understanding communication in contemporary life, which has been dramatically affected by social networking technologies. I have pursued my research questions regarding visual culture by establishing interrelated experiments aimed at developing a working methodology in image communication.

My critical practice has shifted in many ways throughout my time in graduate school, from a modernist, traditional approach in design to one that embraces a postmodern approach to production. A modernist practice, I believe, is one centered around a rational approach to design, emphasizing intelligibility in communication, structure in production, and achieving univocal meanings and messages. Conversely, I've aligned myself with a postmodern practice by embracing a lack of absolutes in communication not as a point of paralysis, but as a celebration of multiplicities of thought, while also rejecting the paralysis that postmodernism often results in. Instead, I use postmodern methods of production to communicate and advance the values I find important. These methods of production emphasize remix, reappropriation, and collage as a way to create idiosyncratic image relationships. The overall intention of my work has been to co-opt the graphic skills that originally created our visual culture and reappropriate them for a critical production.

My chosen content matter deals with conceptions of social and political inequalities and how those inequalities are made visible. These interests were formed by establishing my design practice in the midst of the global financial crisis, and by pursuing my MFA during a time period that saw a number of political movements, including Occupy Wall Street, the Eurozone crisis, the Arab Spring, the rise of gay visibility, and an overall crisis of capitalism. My practice makes these

complex social issues visible in a critical manner by using graphic design methods to support and subvert content. Because complex social issues are reified through images, graphic design has the ability to drastically effect the way issues are communicated, which makes image makers, editors, and designers highly important. After all, an image is a cultural unit of information—it has the ability to construct reality, sway human behavior, challenge perception, influence will, and effect change. In this context, the designer him/herself is a value maker, a fundamentally modernist understanding of design. For this to occur, a designer must have a critical framework from where to think as well as act.

This report is a manifestation of the thoughts, theories, and graphic forms that I have researched and worked on intently during my time in the MFA program and has been divided into several thematic sections. The first section contains my "Values Statement," which explains my values as a designer and clarifies my interests in social and political content. By referencing Walter Benjamin, the second section, "Theoretical Orientation," focuses on how technological developments in the form of social networking and meme-ification have affected image communication, which is a fundamental supposition posed in my work. The third and fourth sections, "Image-text Relationships" and "Visual Tropes," present two very important themes that wholly encompass the body of my design work. In these sections I describe my projects and provide precedents that help further contextualize the work. By examining the implications of the image in the construction of contemporary culture, the works presented in this report reveal my unique role as a designer, blurring the line between cultural critic and cultural producer.

SECTION I — VALUES STATEMENT

My work takes an activist approach to visual communication by using graphic design as a vehicle to voice my values. These personal values have been influenced by my contemporary surroundings, particularly with social movements, becoming interested in images emerging from social and political conflicts. I started to take my design practice seriously in 2007 and 2008 in the midst of the global financial crisis. In 2009, the world saw the "Green Revolution," a national protest in Iran regarding their presidential elections, which captivated me for the movement's prolific use of social networking. In between my time as an undergraduate and graduate student, the Arab Spring took off in 2010 in Tunisia, spreading globally to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and others. The Occupy Wall Street protests began during my first year of graduate school in 2011, which produced incredibly dramatic images depicting men and women in social and political conflicts, which I would use prominently in my work. For each movement, I found myself looking very closely to the images emerging in the media and social networking, studying them closely to find patterns and thinking of ways to experiment with them. I was sympathetic to each movement, but I also felt like a passive consumer of what was occurring globally. How could I, with my graphic design training, contribute in some way to this global disturbance and to issues that were closer to home?

I reacted to the feeling of passivity by establishing a more critical practice than I had done previously in school and in the professional world. Instead of being completely in line with any of the mentioned movements, I focused primarily on social inequalities and how those inequalities can be visualized and communicated. For me, that meant looking closer issues I felt were important to bring attention to were generally (1) economic inequalities and the difficulties of visualizing wealth and poverty through images, (2) consumption both of tangible goods (inequality between have and havenots, consumers vs. producers) but also of intangible pop

culture, and (3) gay visibility and gay rights. These three topics encompassed much of my chosen content through the MFA program. One of the biggest problems with inequalities is that they're often unseen and, thus, not addressed in any meaningful way. My practice made these inequalities visible in many ways: for example, by creating visual disparities and cognitive dissonances through collage, using the concept of a visual trope for gay rights visibility, and reimagining the way social networking technologies shape our consumption of these issues. My practice provided a critical and visual intervention to each issue by using my skills as a graphic designer to subvert or augment content in order to visualize the inequalities in our culture. I believe, as a graphic designer, I can better reify the issues to others and strive for egalitarianism in the broadest sense.

While the results of such a practice may not be immediately quantifiable, I look to the AdBusters publication as a successful example of a critical practice. After all, the magazine's now iconic poster catalyzed the Occupy Wall Street movement, which depicts a dancer posing in arabesque atop artist Arturo Dimodica's sculpture, *Charging Bull,* in New York City's financial district. I was surprised to learn that the Canadian anti-consumerist organization that puts out a niche monthly magazine was at the center of a global movement regarding capitalism because I had always criticized AdBusters for a lack of any tangible action. But the magazine's Occupy Wall Street successes ultimately inspired my own practice to adopt a critical approach.

Adbusters' primary method to accomplish their critical practice centered around memes, which recently emerged as an internet phenomenon where images, ideas, videos, and other content spread “virally” from user to user on the internet. I, too, co-opted memes in my practice because I believe they have incredible power to change cultural perception. They are also a great example of digital reproduction acting to spread ideas on a collective scale. Kalle Lasn contextualizes meme-making in terms of power. Similar to the way I view designers as value makers, Kalle Lasn, founder of AdBusters, states the following of memes:

> "A meme is a cultural unit of information—a catch-phrase, a concept, a tune, a notion of fashion, philosophy, or politics. Memes pass through a population in much the same way genes pass through a species. Good, strong memes can change minds, alter behaviour, catalyze collective mindshifts, and transform cultures. In our information age, whoever makes memes, holds the power." [1]

Because of the democratizing effects of digital technologies, meme makers are a strong force in cultural production and have the ability to shift public perception on various social and political issues. For myself, the meme maker is very much like a designer who has the power to communicate and change perception. In the end, I wanted to use the power Lasn refers to to visualize social inequalities in our culture and they became a vehicle for my values to be communicated through.

While my values never shifted in graduate school, they certainly became more prominent as I became more confident as a designer. And as they became more incorporated into my work, I felt my practice became more meaningful to me. Even projects that may have missed the mark in some way were important to me because they still were working to develop my voice. Through the process of completing graduate school, I became more cognizant of the impact of my cultural contributions as a designer and worked to develop a methodology that better voiced my values.

1. Lasn, *Meme Wars: The Creative Destruction of Neoclassical Economics*

SECTION II — THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Digital Reproduction and Image Communication

With the introduction of social networking technologies like Facebook and Twitter, which are marked by their ability to distribute content on a massive and collective scale, image communication has experienced an enormous change nearly as significant as the invention of photography. When a user "shares" and "retweets" an image, I argue they reproduce the content by expanding its visibility and, thus, its impact. Digital reproduction through social networking, I assert, allows for images to intertextually build upon themselves on an exponential level, resulting in a culture assembled by visual tropes or recurring themes. In my critical practice, these visual tropes became a central focus in my work by communicating social inequalities in the age of digital reproduction. To put these developments into historical context, I look to Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which discusses how mechanical and technological developments have significantly altered our experiences in both consuming and producing visual matter.

In his essay, Benjamin notes that technological progress has been marked by the ability to reproduce visual content, which has drastically changed a viewer's relationship with what he calls the "aura." This aura, he argues, is linked to the experience of viewing a work of art and the destruction of that aura is by the hand of reproduction, which acts to sever the original work from its many copies. An example of this development are photographic technologies, which were created with the purpose of capturing and duplicating an original source (a photographic negative). In fact, the original source, the negative, isn't the work itself, but a template to facilitate its reproduction. Benjamin describes the introduction of these technologies as follows: "For the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual..."[2]. As a supposition in my practice, these early

2 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 112.

developments have exponentially increased with the introduction of social networking, which acts to create an intertextual web of visual content constructed out of links and copies. While the aura is no more, viewers now experience imagery through mobile phones, tablet computers, laptops, and projections, which all affect the intended consumption of the image.

What is left in the wake of the destruction of the aura? Benjamin believes that when "the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics" (106)[3]. He describes two competing ideologies that emerge from the elimination of the aura: one that believes in aestheticizing politics (for example, the Italian Futurists) and the other that believes in politicizing art (the Dadaists). The Futurists valued speed, beauty in violence, and the celebration of war for its aesthetic possibilities evident in Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*[4]. Conversely, Benjamin presents the Dada movement of the 1910s and early 20s as an example of politicizing art through establishing critical practices. By turning their work into a "missile"[5], the Dadaists were able to advance a political critique through their work and counter the dangerous practice of aestheticizing politics.

While I do believe that Benjamin's essay was timely, his essay has remained relevant as modern society continues to transition from an analogue to a digitally driven existence where the aura is a concept lost and forgotten. While Benjamin was discussing tangible photographs, today, the Internet and social networking technologies have made that process intangible. Instead of making physical duplications, images are now copied perfectly through binary code, eliminating any conception of what is "original" in this ever-reappropriated image-world. In August 2005, lawyer and activist, Lawrence Lessig, gave a talk titled "Who Owns Culture?" in which he discussed how new technologies have democratized creative production. Digital technologies, he

3. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 106.
4. Marinetti, "Futurist Manifesto."
5. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 115.

argues, have altered the way we create, reproduce, and distribute visual content. By eliminating the aura, we have, in many ways democratized the power of communication, a phenomenon that Lasn also referred to in his statement about meme makers. Lessig argues that anybody with access to a computer can remix images and sounds from our culture to express their ideas, personality, and creativity.

> "It has an extraordinary democratic potential we're just beginning to understand as it changes the freedom to speak by changing the power to speak.… It invites this kind of creativity, the freedom to remix not just words but culture and to use a free digital network to spread it as broadly as the world demands it. This is what these technologies make possible."[6]

Digital reproduction has changed creative production in many ways. Lessig's discussion of remixing culture is the foundation of my practice, a practice that is dependent on the technological developments both he and I have described. Collage, which makes up a significant amount of my work, is one of the most obvious examples of remix. By making digital collages from cultural fragments I find through social networking, I create work that is dependent on the digital culture that it is a part of. In addition, I use Twitter feeds in my work and often visually assign those feeds to images. This process of reassignment is a form of remix and entirely dependent on digital technologies for the work to be experienced.

Personally, I find the destruction of the aura to be extremely liberating with new technologies allowing for innovative ways of sharing information and creative possibilities to use and connect cultural fragments. Ultimately, the way I deal with the loss of aura is to recognize reproducibility as a certainty and exploit the methods of reproduction that originally created our image world. With digital reproduction in mind, and through the various methods of reappropriation, I have been able to develop my critical practice with the image as a central focus.

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6 Lessig, "Who Owns Culture?"

Placing my practice

In addition to laying out the technological landscape for my research questions, I spent time finding an appropriate discipline that I felt comfortable placing my work in. Design was far too broad for my purposes. Graphic design came closer, but it alone had many unintended associations that focused solely on formal elements, missing an important cultural component. Visual rhetoric slowly emerged as the primary discipline for both my analytical and creative production. However, in attempting to define the discipline, I came across the difficulty in discerning whether it is a thing, process, method, or some combination of all three. This problem was not unfamiliar to me, as design is often confronted with the same dilemma. By defining visual rhetoric as a mode of inquiry to pursue my research topics, I created work that allowed a viewer's experience to access my research and my values.

My first study in visual rhetoric was a production focusing on image-text relationships. I chose this visual communication method because, for me, image-text compositions are one of the clearest examples of visual rhetoric. But in my production, I came across difficulties in understanding the relationship between images and texts. There is a tendency to define visual rhetoric as simply a category of the established discipline of rhetoric, which is traditionally concerned with verbal and written discourse, and typically non-visual. Defining visual rhetoric in this manner suggests that persuasion is achieved not through words or text, but through the visual-ness of something, becoming simply a subdiscipline of rhetoric, which I disagree with. In her essay "Rhetorical History of the Visual," Cara Finnegan argues that visual rhetoric has been, in the past, described as a "product" of rhetoric.[7] The problem that exists with this definition is the implication that visual rhetoric is simply a formal manifestation (concerning the non-word) of rhetoric (word). It is not the visual-ness that defines visual rhetoric from the word; rather the two are much more similar than expected, an assertion that is explored heavily in my work. Finnegan

7. Finnegan, "Rhetorical History of the Visual." *Defining Visual Rhetorics*.

agrees, too, that the separation of image and text is forced and unproductive. They're far too intertwined to be pulled apart because, after all, one certainly informs the other.

It is my belief that visual rhetoric is concerned with how perception is influenced through images and their relation to text, technology, and time, which work to provide a cultural context. I emphasize the cultural component because, for my purposes, visual rhetoric is a vehicle for accessing and exchanging cultural communication. Instead of consuming visual forms solely for aesthetic value, one can consider visual rhetoric from a textual perspective. By this, I mean to look to the structures, codes, languages, systems, and technological conditions that are implored in the construction of meaning through visual form, which have all been part of my work to some capacity. When considering the discipline in this way, a maker does not forget the material conditions that affect his/her work, a fundamental principle brought from Benjamin. I have included his thoughts on technological reproduction into my understanding of visual rhetoric because a creator must be cognizant of not just the composition itself, but of the broader impact of the work, the material context the work exists in, and the intended manner of consumption.

But the most apt definition of visual rhetoric comes from Finnegan, who argues that it should not be considered a product. Her proposal is that visual rhetoric is a "mode of inquiry, defined as a critical and theoretical orientation that makes issues of visuality relevant to rhetorical theory." My intention is that the work I produce operates as a mode of inquiry into our visual culture. But perhaps more importantly, I want a viewer to enter this mode of inquiry into issues of inequality by using my work as a lens to view their cultural surroundings. Inequalities that previously were hidden, are made visible through the lens of my work. Finnegan asserts that visual rhetoric as a mode of inquiry,

> " ...relies upon critiques of vision and visuality to illuminate the complex dynamics of power and knowledge at play in and around images … embraces the complexities of the

> relationships between images and texts and argues that visual images should not be artificially separated from texts for analysis."[8]

Finnegan's characterization is a great reminder that visual rhetoric is about the power involved in communication, which, once again, refers back to Lasn's thoughts on meme makers. To communicate and alter perception is a powerful ability. But my conception of visual rhetoric recognizes that power and knowledge surrounding images has changed because of the democratizing effects of digital technologies. In line with Lessig's thoughts on technology, the power of communication is now intricately linked to social networks, helping distribute communication on a massive scale, which cannot be forgotten when studying visual rhetoric.

I have adopted Finnegan's definition, which provides the most inclusive approach to visual rhetoric and leaves room for growth and interdisciplinary research. Visual rhetoric, therefore, is less about a *thing* than a mode of inquiry used for analysis and creative production. This term would encompass much of the body of my work produced in graduate school, using both for a textual analysis as well as a critical production. Ultimately, graphic design, in conjunction with visual rhetoric, expresses that the work I produce is analytical but also creative in nature, necessitating a production. Thus I began my production of image and text relationships as my first significant step in my understanding of visual rhetoric.

8. Finnegan, "Rhetorical History of the Visual." *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. 198.

SECTION III — IMAGE-TEXT RELATIONSHIPS

***Hammer Project* — Precedent:**

Early in the graduate program, I examined image-text relationships from a structured approach, which described types of relationships that could exist. The process first began by using an existing image-text model based on Professor Daniel Olsen's categories whose system defines five types of relationships that cover most visual communication. Seeing these categories was a fundamental moment for me, which I attempted to master and then challenge with the *Hammer Project*. Olsen's categories of image-text relationships are described as follows:

1. Illustration: The text simply reiterates what is represented within the image. This relationship emphasizes denotation.
2. Clarification: The text provides additional information that qualifies what is represented within the image.
3. Modification: The text begins to support a symbolic understanding of the content, relying on connotation rather than denotation.
4. Complication: The text commands the viewer to feel or do something.
5. Contradiction: The text contradicts what is represented within the image.[9]

There are several practitioners of image-text production, but Barbara Kruger is one of the most prominent, focusing almost exclusively in the complication category. Kruger's highly combative statements challenge viewers to feel certain emotions and do certain actions. Her work resides primarily, but not exclusively, in the complication category through her use of "you," "I," and "we," which acts to emphasize the role of the viewer. In many ways she implicates the viewer in some act by using graphic design to delve into personal identity and human behavior. Her declarative statements are so clear that little to no ambiguity remains.

9. Olsen, Model of image-text relationships.

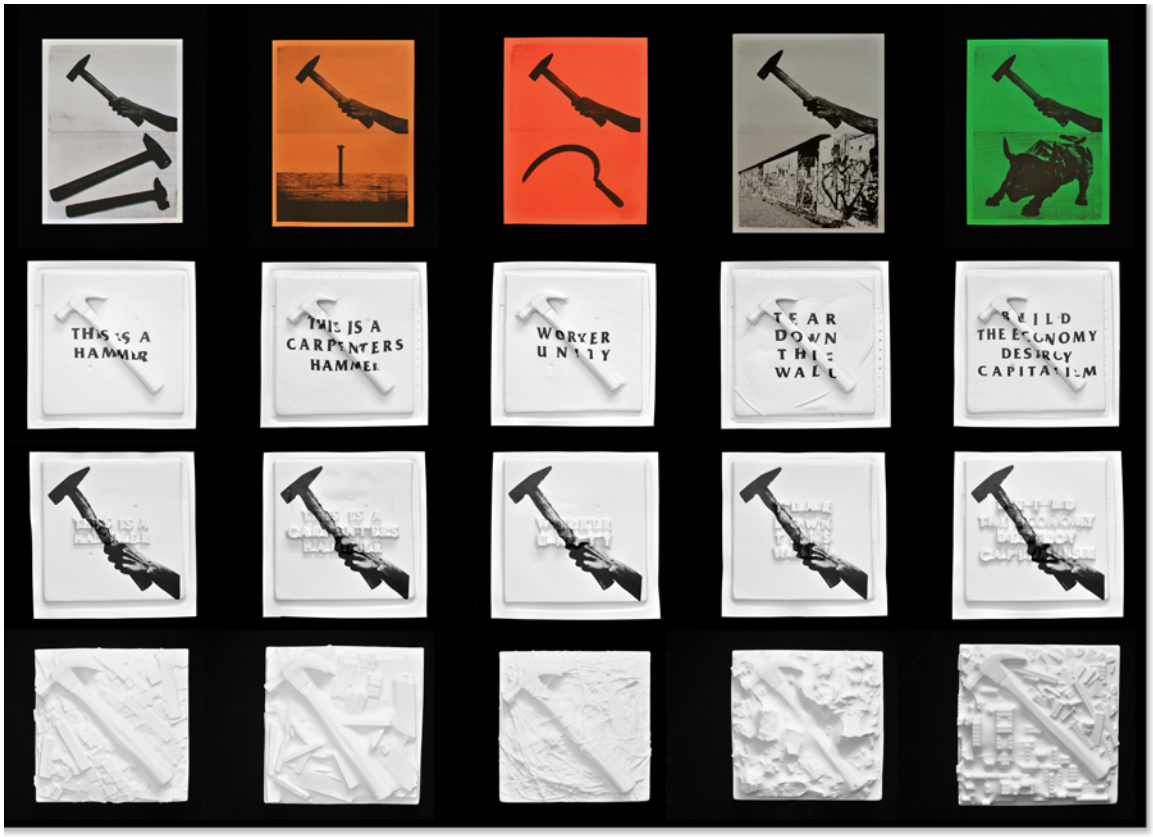
Figure 1: Barbara Kruger, *I shop therefore I am*, 1987 and *For Sale*, 2012

I look to Kruger not just because of her prolific use of the complication category, but also because of the type of content she pursues. From to feminism to consumerism, nationalism and religion, her declarative statements are forceful reminders that a critical practice is possible. In Figure 1 she has focused on consumerism in two different eras (in 1987[10] and for the unofficial consumerist holiday "Black Friday" in 2012[11]) maintaining a clear, consistent, and unambiguous message across time. Additionally, her work exists not just to be combative on a gallery wall but as a tool used to communicate in the public sphere, appearing on protest signs, t-shirts, and posters. This type of authored image-text production becomes an instantly recognizable visual statement of her ideology and a way for viewers to express their own opinions by spreading her work.

Going forward, the question became: how might I use Olsen's image-text relationships for a critical practice as well as innovatively challenging it? I also had to consider how might I retain my values in the process of exploring image-text relationships, which Kruger does so well.

10. Kruger, *I shop therefore I am*
11. Kruger, *For Sale*, appearing in the New York Times

***Hammer Project* — Description:**



1. Illustration 2. Clarification 3. Modification 4. Complication 5. Contradiction

Figure 2: Completed *Hammer Project*, 2012

With these precedents in mind, I decided I would test out the five different image-text relationships in several different mediums in order to see if this model could be used with other graphic and non-graphic forms such as image juxtapositions and sculptural form. The objective of my *Hammer Project*, which centered around revolutionary rhetoric and symbolism in varying degrees, was first and foremost an exercise in becoming comfortable with image-text relationships and to master Olsen's model. It wasn't centered around content as much as simply experimenting with different 2D and 3D forms to satisfy each category, but I still used the project as an opportunity to explore strong political statements similar to Kruger.

An important aspect of my project was the use of commercial stock photography, which is inherently adaptable. Since a stock image is often designed to be neutral, I decided that the combination between it's commercial appeal and the revolutionary rhetoric I was pursuing was a dissonance that I wanted to achieve. Through the process of experimenting with Olsen's image-text categories, I wondered how benign and how radical image communication could become by shifting the context gradually with each category. I required a stock image of a hammer to be used in some form in each category, because when the model was introduced to me, the first category, illustration, used a hammer with the text, "this is a hammer." Below are the five texts used to complete Olsen's image-text model, becoming more and more radical with each successive category:

1. Illustration: This is a hammer.
2. Clarification: This is a carpenter's hammer.
3. Modification: Worker unity.
4. Complication: Tear down this wall.
5. Contradiction: Build the economy, destroy capitalism.

Based on the work's subsequent reactions in casual, critical, and gallery settings, the incorporation of text specifies a univocal message to be communicated (Row 3 of Figure 2). Evident in Row 3 of Figure 2 is the traditional approach to visual communication: straight forward image-text compositions that very little participation of the viewer to complete the communication transmission. But the other possibilities of presenting the content through image-image relationships and sculptural form (Rows 1 and 4 of Figure 2) provided a host of possibilities and interpretations, which was an intriguing moment for me. These interpretations put greater responsibility on the viewer's individual context and less control in my hands, which I felt introduced an element of relativism to Olsen's model.

Image juxtapositions and sculptural form provided an alternative to the traditional model. For example, image-image relationships in Row 1 require a previous understanding of what the juxtaposed image is, which could usually be clarified with text. For me, these less defined ways of representing the message were interesting to me because I wanted to viewer to participate in the completion of the message. And rather than the work of Kruger, which allows little to no misunderstanding of her intentions, I liked the added ambiguity that the alternative methods provided. The image-image relationships would become my primary interest in subsequent projects, which would later be described as photomontage and collage.

To reiterate, I argue this structured approach to communication in the form of categories of relationships is a traditional, modernist approach to communication because intelligibility and univocal messages are a presupposition to this model. However, by challenging the model to include more idiosyncratic representations like using image juxtapositions and sculptural forms to communicate, I was able to embrace a decentered approach to image communication, not as a point of paralysis, but as a celebration of dynamism and idiosyncratic relationships that would become evident in subsequent projects. These multiplicities of thought allow for greater connections that extend beyond the work itself without being so singular as typical image-text relationships tend to be.

***First Iteration Projection* — Precedent:**

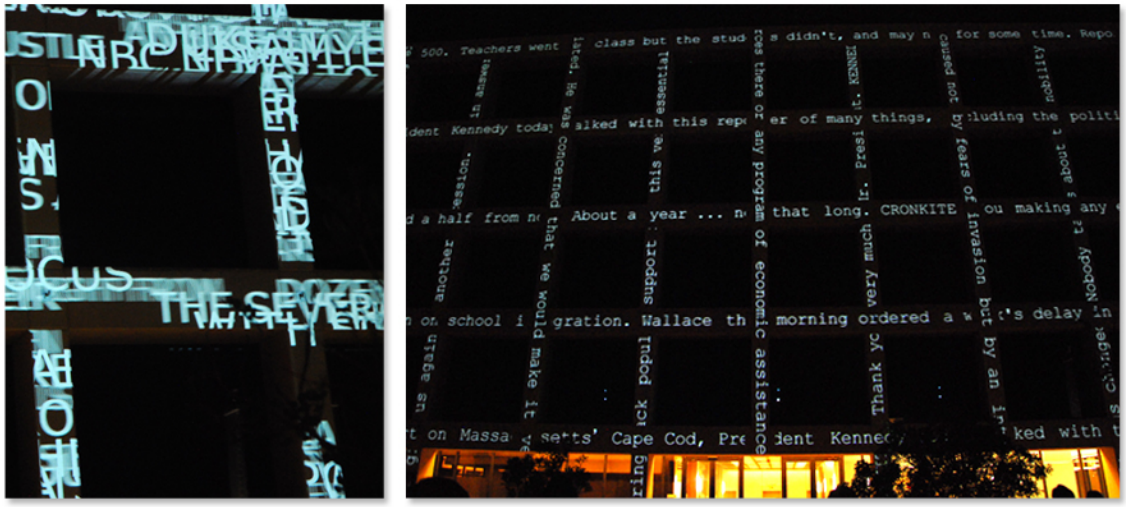


Figure 3: Ben Rubin, *And That's the Way It Is*, 2012

At the end of the *Hammer Project,* I was open to finding new models of representing texts in more idiosyncratic ways. Multimedia artist Ben Rubin provided a great example of new technologies changing the way text can communicate with a viewer. In April 2012, to commemorate the dedication of Walter Cronkite Plaza at UT Austin, Rubin created a massive projection on the College of Communication building depicting archival transcripts of news broadcasts during the Cronkite era along with live news tickers. The text scrolled across the facade of the building, providing a glimpse into live news as well as historical headlines, which were separated visually by different typefaces.

His project, *And That's the Way It Is*,[12] expanded on the possibilities of text interacting with space through its innovative use of projection to convey historical transcripts, deliver the day's news, and augment the role of the building itself. In this case, site specificity became an important part of the project, with the text augmenting the role of the building. The plaza, a central hub for learning journalism, rhetoric, and communication, is contextualized by the text

12. Rubin, *And That's the Way It Is*.

both historically (Cronkite ticker) and contemporarily (live news ticker). I also argue that text in this project becomes image-like in many ways. The formal decisions defined by his system including the gridded Cronkite tickers and collage-like live news tickers, created an ever-changing mural upon the building.

One of the strongest elements of Rubin's projection that I brought into my own practice is the incorporation of live feeds, which creates an always evolving relationship between the viewer and content. In Rubin's case, texts are no longer pre-defined as in Olsen's model, but defined through external sources, which the designer has less control over. While Rubin does maintain some control by defining the parameters for the content, the messages are free to communicate anything within the bounds of the defined system. Rubin's generative model brings up an important shift from authoring content in Olsen's model to system-making evident in Rubin's projection. Though system making and generative graphic design are nothing new, Rubin's system is significant because the level of dynamism achieved is entirely dependent on recent digital technologies, which rely on aggregators to pull up live news feeds. It would be difficult for a system dealing in analogue technologies to reproduce this same level of dynamism and certainly it would be difficult to reproduce it in any tangible way, as well.

In line with Benjamin's conception of the aura, while the project may be an intangible projection and rely on digital technologies, it still must be experienced much like a painting. A viewer must go to the plaza in order to experience its innovative use of scale, motion, and, most importantly, live feeds. A photograph of the projection, for example, provides hardly an accurate experience of the work, much like a film still only provides a fraction of what the film is about. But a photograph of this project is even worse than a film still because a photograph will always be a dated representation of the project, not its current and live state. Recognizing the implications of such a technology, I decided to incorporate the use of live feeds in my *First*

Iteration Projection. As a way to explore my research questions, I began to experiment with the possibilities of using live technologies to decenter the typical image-text relationship.

***First Iteration Projection* — Description:**

Figure 4: Screenshot of Los Angeles Times homepage, April 18, 2012

When I was preparing for this project a major news story was circulating in the media about an image of two army soldiers posing with the body parts of Afghan fighters. The image headlined the major American news sources on April 18, 2012 and I wanted to use it for the project because of how timely and contentious the topic continues to be. Though I might feel somewhat ambivalent, when I saw the image, I knew I wanted to provide a criticism of military abuse in some creative and idiosyncratic way. After all, images seem to be the only way of proving that abuses exist, acting as a form of social responsibility. But in addition to providing a criticism, I was interested in the way average people use war and military rhetoric either to justify this image or in general conversation. For context, there is, of course, an obvious visual connection to the images taken at Abu Ghraib in 2003 and 2004, which depict US army troops abusing prisoners in Iraq. Those images shattered the perception of the military and became a significant moment in the Middle East wars, so I was particularly keen on using this newest image.

I began this project first by recording how people in the comments sections of newspaper websites rhetorically justified what was represented in the image, which resulted in three themes (see Figure 5). The themes were selected after I started grouping similar comments together, which resulted in the following:

1. Yellow — Comments that were critical of media.
2. Orange — Comments that were empathetic and justified soldier actions.
3. Red — Comments that were critical of the soldiers.

Thus in parsing and grouping the comments into types, I began to create categories that emerged from the existing texts, much like Olsen's model. However, I felt the direction of this project to be less creative and more analytical in nature because I was simply grouping information that was already clearly stated. This process wasn't part of a critical practice, so how could I create an innovative system similar to Rubin's that allowed for that critical practice to emerge? After all, my objective was to create critical and idiosyncratic relationships between this terrible image and the broader discussion of American military power.

I went back to thinking about Rubin's approach to text production, which relied on live news feeds to gauge the news. Rather than looking at the newspaper comments in their entirety, I used the keywords “troops” and “soldiers” and started running the keywords through Twitter to see how those terms were used. I then projected the tweets onto a print of the image, which I found created unexpected statements that continually contextualized the image (see Figure 6). As mentioned, I was ambivalent of my own opinion of the image, and putting the keywords through Twitter and projecting on top of the image provided just as ambivalent responses with some supporting and others criticizing the military.

Through the process of creating this project, I became far less interested in categorizing the types of responses, and opened up my practice to unpredictable relationships that I couldn't predict, similar to Rubin's system. I was interested in visualizing texts that were ironically

connected with the image or subverted it in some way, but weren't directly connected with the image itself. For example, there were many tweets praising the military and used the phrase "God bless the troops." When projected against the image, it created a cognitive dissonance that the viewer had to resolve by either providing prominence to the image or the text. They could either discount the image or the text in order to resolve the dissonance. And while there may be some moral objection to projecting decontextualized tweets on top of this deeply troubling image I didn't particularly care because I wanted to generate as many relationships as possible for the purpose of showing the irony of the tweeted statements. This was, after all, an image of American military abuse, and I wanted it in the much larger rhetorical context of the public's perception of the military.

This project raised many questions for my design practice. It decentered structured communication by using live Twitter feeds and it also removed my own authored opinion because the project wasn't about my personal thoughts of the military or the image, but more of a zeitgeist of current feelings of military power. This system created messages that I may or may not have shared, a contrast to the *Hammer Project*. In the end, I was far more fascinated with building the initial system and letting the relationships define themselves, an inverse approach to Olsen's categories. This element of chance and idiosyncratic possibility would develop into an attitude that would later inform further iterations of this projection.

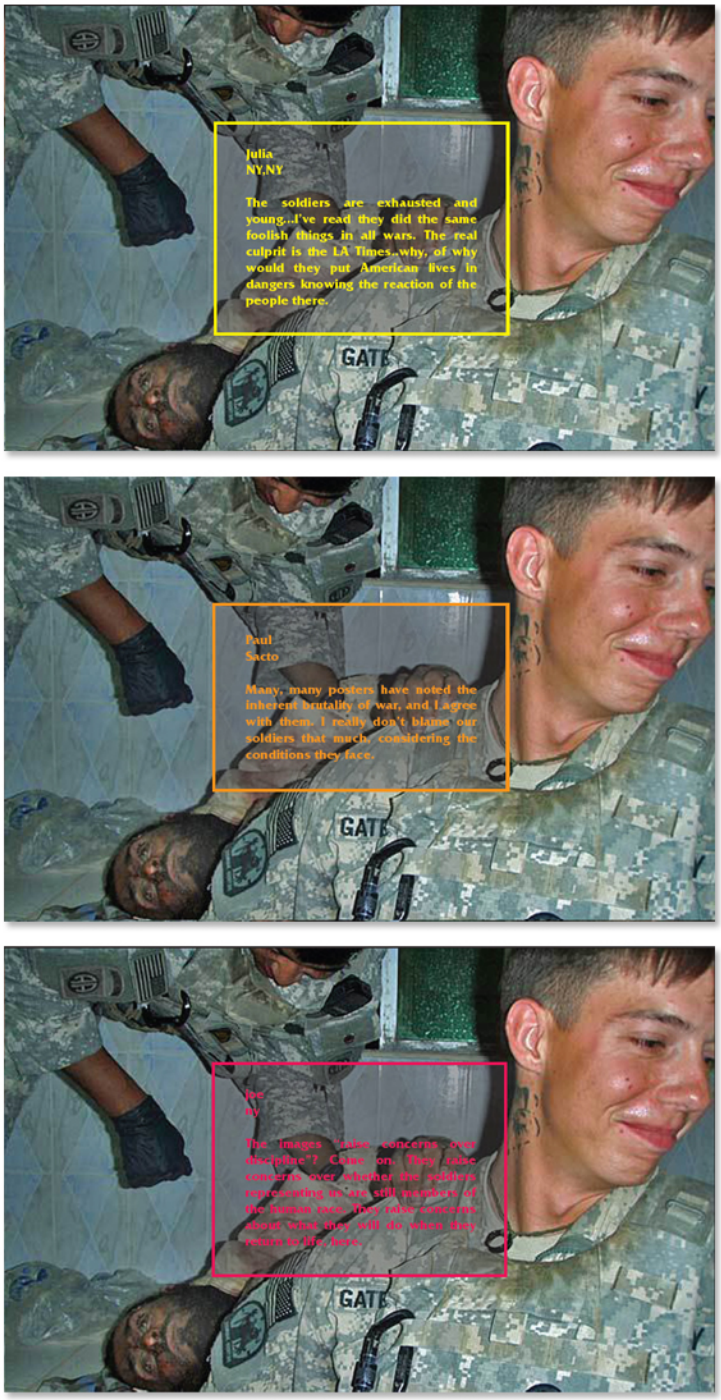


Figure 5: Initial image-text experimentations

Figure 6: Completed *First Iteration Projection*, 2012

SECTION IV. — VISUAL TROPES

***Trope Collages*— Precedent:**

After image-text relationships, I re-focused my practice to consider prominent tropes in visual culture for their activist potential. Visual tropes have been a central focus in my work, which I defined as being a tool of a symbolic order. If isolated and expanded, a visual trope can become one of the greatest methods available for the communication and realization of social issues. In my research, I've asserted that visual tropes are a form of intertextual communication, which rely on other related visual works to gain power and validity. Literary theorist Gérard Genette defines intertextuality as being "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts," and "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts."[13] Adapted for visual rhetoric, intertextuality is the referencing of another visual composition's form and content to establish validity and intelligibility.

How does intertextuality, which creates a massive web of interrelated links, occur and become successful? I argue by the hand of digital reproduction, which acts to distribute image communication on a massive scale as I have detailed in section II of this report. For my purposes, I looked to the process of meme-ification through the internet, which is one of the best contemporary examples of how reproducibility works on a massive scale in contemporary culture. To be clear, both the reproduction of the images (via binary code) and the distribution pathways (via social networking) are intricately linked together. One cannot exist without the other. Thus, I argue that digital reproduction through social networking has increased the visibility of visual tropes by creating an intertextual web of communication. For comparison, let us first look to some historical examples of intertextuality in image communication.

13. Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*.

Figure 7: Joe Rosenthal, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima,* 1945 and
Yevgeny Khaldei, *Raising a flag over the Reichstag,* 1945

Joe Rosenthal's *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* and Yevgeny Khaldei's *Raising a flag over the Reichstag* were both photographed during World War II (see Figure 7). Similar to Rosenthal's image on the left, Khaldei's image was taken purposefully to generate a definable photographic moment for the Soviet Red Army. In April 1945, Khaldei photographed the Battle of Berlin after Rosenthal's image had already become a defining image through LIFE magazine's publication in February 1945. There are, of course, obvious formal repetitions, but their successes do not come entirely from referencing the same compelling visual arrangement or because they both emphasize the same signifier, the flag. Instead, I argue, their successes come from the intangible concept being signified, victory, which communicates a sense of nationalistic pride and results in a trope that can appear across different cultures and time.

The concept of the visual trope is not restricted to the static image and has had significant influence in film, as well. With the support of the Soviet and Cuban governments and through the prolific Russian film studio Mosfilm, the Cuban film *I am Cuba*[14] successfully used revolutionary visual tropes to depict the plight of the proletariat in Cuba under the Fulgencio Batista presidency. Directed in 1964 by filmmaker Mikhail Kalatozov, the film is set during the Cuban Revolution

14. Kalatozov, *I am Cuba*. Mosfilm.

and exposes social hierarchies (focusing on a prostitute, farmer, student, and rebel) through the use of symbolic visual tropes in order to show the detrimental effects of capitalism on the working class of Cuba.

Figure 8: Mikhail Kalatozov, *I am Cuba,* 1964, stills

One example depicts a poor farmer with a sickle hard at work while reaping his crop of sugarcane. His hard work is ultimately for nigh when his plot of land is sold without his consent, causing him to burn the field and raise his fist in despair (see Figure 8). Another example shows

students staging a massive protest where the dove, symbol of peace, takes prominence in the scene as the police attempt to break up the protest by shooting water cannons into the crowd. Another student is killed and his funeral is visually associated with the Cuban flag and Cuban cigars, establishing a nationalistic pride for his act of martyrdom.

I am Cuba presents a romantic and aestheticized portrayal of the supporters affiliated with Fidel Castro. Through the use of various revolutionary tropes such as the inclusion of the Cuban flag with the death of the student, the water cannons shooting at the protests, the theatrical death of one of the students (see Figure 8), the use of doves, and the fetishizing of weapons, the film presents a romantic portrayal of the men and women who fought and suffered for, in their view, a nationalist goal for the good of Cuba. Visual tropes like those in this film were powerful tools to shift public opinion of the Cuban Revolution and indicate to me their persuasive potential.

The various visual tropes tactically used in *I am Cuba* can still be seen in contemporary protests and social movements outside of film. The Occupy Movement is the most timely comparison, which produced images much in line with *I am Cuba* revolutionary tactics. Fists in the air become a common theme, but so do gestures of conflict between governmental power and its citizenry, which I focused on in my *Trope Collages*. While it may not be water cannons as in the case of *I am Cuba*, the visual trope is modified into pepper spray, which became a defining gesture in the movement. The fact that visual tropes are used both in photojournalism and in film in the same manner is indicative of the significance of these visual communication methods. They are a historically significant form of conveying symbols and values, especially during periods of conflict. Through trial and error in my projects, I became more familiar with the visual trope as an activist method of persuasion and adopted it into my critical practice.

Trope Collages — **Description:**

Figure 9: Completed *Trope Collages*, 2012

With these historical precedents as a foundation, I decided to collect various tropes that I found to be particularly striking and communicate them through visual assemblages. The concept for these assemblages was to make visual patterns in tropes evident across elements such as time, culture, and gender in order to find a trope that I could expand and augment for later projects. My impetus was also influenced by observations of stereotypical representations and gestures used in many tropes. In order to accomplish this, I used the method of collage to critically engage with the images, make sense of them, and provide a critical contribution that aimed to augment or subvert the trope through unique combinations.

I began this trajectory by gathering images that had formal and content repetition, which ultimately showed historical and contemporary equivalents for the same trope. For example, visual conceptions of financial crises began to look quite different when I juxtaposed images from the Great Depression and images from the current recession (see Figure 9). While vastly different, what connects the two is the fundamental symbolism of deep panic and despair, as well as very similar photographic composition relying heavily on gestures of angst and pain. A critical moment in my work occurred when I began seeing the stock traders' panic contextualized by the farm workers' panic, which emerged through this collaging process.

The tropes I chose to collage were protest, martyrdom, financial crisis, and victory because they were broad enough to be found across most cultures. Each of these had varying degrees of success as a trope. The example, protest (see Figure 9), was a difficult concept to represent because protests can be quite diverse, from the typical fist-in-the-air marches, to a silent hunger strikes, to same-sex kisses for equality. While these are actions that protestors do, it is important to note that actions affecting protestors are just as important because they often become symbols of oppression. For the purpose of the collage, I focused on the spraying gesture either from water cannons (Birmingham Campaign, 1963) or pepper spray canisters (University of California, Davis, 2011), which, in the case of the Occupy Movement, was used to garner

support. To observe the shift from water cannon to pepper spray reveals a visual evolution of the trope, one that has had a long history in segregation and oppression.

I began digitally piecing together the images, without a deep understanding of the implication of collaging these images meant. At this point in my practice, I was still interested in experimenting with the relationships between image and texts, which required me to include associated words that signified what the images supported. I chose words that would support, not subvert the collage, focusing on making a very clear understanding of what was being seen. Though I resisted the absence of text, collage became a very plausible solution to making the connections between disparate events, whether chronologically, culturally, or geographically apart. A good example of this process is the case of martyrdom, which is also, to some extent, part of protest.

In the case of the martyrdom collage, I began to see connections between the iconic images of the Iranian protest elections of 2009 and the iconic images of the Occupy Movement in 2011. On June 20, 2009, during the height of the Iranian election protests, images and video circulated through social networking websites of an unidentified woman shot by a pro-government militiaman. Her name would later be identified as Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old Iranian woman who was shot while walking near a protest with her piano teacher in Tehran.

When I saw Agha-Soltan's image, I made immediate visual connection with an image from Occupy Oakland. On October 26, 2011, more than two years later, police allegedly hit Scott Olsen, an Iraq War veteran, in the head with a projectile during an Occupy Wall St. protest in Oakland, California, fracturing his skull and critically injuring him. Images of Olsen bloodied and being carried away were circulated through social networking and used to galvanize action through Occupy Wall St. websites, not unlike the resistance movement used Agha-Soltan in Iran. Social networking became the primary method of communication between Occupy members in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as to the general public in an unfiltered manner. Like the

death of Neda Agha-Soltan, the injury to Scott Olsen provided a very strong rallying point for Occupy movement—both of which were established through the incredibly similar visuals. When compared, these image have a very strong visual connection can be made across culture, gender, and cause. Whether or not they are martyrs is irrelevant because I argue we are not concerned about them as actual martyrs, but with their representations as martyrs. It is their representations on computer and mobile phone screens that people use to express their support the movements. People are not as concerned about the authenticity of the images (i.e. was the projectile launched from police or was it friendly fire?) as photojournalists might be.

This is only one of the many examples I found when attempting to make some visual connection between visual tropes. Juxtaposing images like these began to tell me that visual tropes act less to communicate content and more to express values and ideas symbolically. For example, the sharing of the Neda Agha-Soltan image worldwide provided a compelling story, but that woman could have been any other woman of equal standing. The image wasn't necessarily about Agha-Soltan herself, but rather a representation of Agha-Soltan and the constructed narrative surrounding it. Her image was shared by those in the movement through social networking to express their values and outrage at the situation, which helped keep the Iranian Green Revolution alive when they really needed a cause, much like Occupy Oakland. In this sea of repetition, technology has allowed people to feel empowered by using images as tools for the expression of their values, identity, and political attitudes. Many of these tools come in the form of trope-like representations and are a way for social network users to express themselves through a toolbox of visual cues.

***Protest Trope Collages* — Precedents:**

Figure 10: Gérard Julien, *The Marseille Kiss,* 2012

After focusing on four different tropes, I found myself wanting to specify one trope to experiment with. That trope was the same-sex kissing trope, which emerged centrally from the above image. On October 23, 2012, an image began to circulate through Twitter depicting two women kissing in front of a crowd of shocked onlookers in Marseille, France. The onlookers were staging a protest against same-sex marriage and the two women were counter-protesting. This image, taken by photographer Gerard Julién, was "retweeted," "liked," and "shared" thousands of times through various social networking sites. It eventually made its way from the traditional news sources like the France's *Le Monde* to the *Sydney Morning Herald* all the way to *USA Today* and to news websites like the *Huffington Post*. The image featured two young women, 17 and 19, engaged in a seemingly passionate kiss in front of shocked protesters. In the French magazine *Tetû*, the two women, Julia and Auriane, described it as an act of equality for gay rights. Translated from the magazine, they describe the scene as follows: "While we were kissing, they were screaming, 'You're disgusting! You are not beautiful!'"[15] Their beauty seems to be a significant point of discussion on social networking, as well. @BeccaMartin_ described them as "#cute" in a retweet of the image. "These women look beautiful" said @PenguinGalaxy. The Huffington Post user Atwill describe them as "hot stuff" whereas Cals Fdude queries, "2 hot girls

15. The Advocate, "Photo of Two Women Kissing Before French Protestors Goes Viral."

kissing. Why don't we show a picture of 2 old guys kissing each other? After all, gay marriages is (sic) not only for hot girls. Or is that because they can't sell that picture?"[16] This user sums up many questions regarding successfully shared imagery. It is not clear if the image is popular because it is a symbol with incredible substance or because these two women are visually compelling. A nuanced combination of both is most likely at work.

On Twitter, many users misrepresented the image by tweeting, "Lesbian couple kiss in front on an anti-gay protest in France. Brilliant." In fact, both are heterosexual as indicated in the interview with *Tetû*. It some respects, it doesn't matter that they're not gay. The details aren't nearly important as the formal value of the image, which shows a clash of viewpoints in a dramatic fashion. Roland Barthes states in *Mythologies*, "It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself" (18)[17]. Social network users are not interested in the actual status of their sexuality, but rather their image as lesbians, which has little to do with Julia and Auriane themselves. An equally attractive, equally feminine pair could be swapped in much to the same success, regardless of sexuality, much like a stock image. If they can visually convey a sense of passion, then that may be enough to convince most people.

In the end, while the act may be a performance, the reproduction of the act as a photograph implies that it is not. Viewers assume that the representation of the two women operates as a valid form of photojournalism because the act has been reproduced as a photograph and framed for its news potential. By eliminating Benjamin's aura, the photograph eliminates the full understanding of the act. Did the kiss last minutes and was it truly passionate? Or was it a quick peck that the women were dared to do? Reproduction eliminates these questions and viewers are left to rely on how it is framed through social networking.

16. Huffington Post, "Two Women Kiss In Front Of Anti-Gay Protests In Marseille, France."
17. Barthes, *Mythologies*.

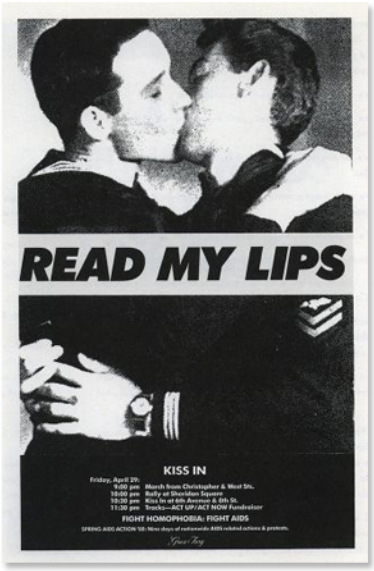


Figure 11: ACT UP, *Read My Lips*, 1988

This same-sex kiss image has existed previously in other activist contexts, as well. In 1988, an image of two men kissing was posted through the streets of New York City during the height of the AIDS crisis. The above poster was created Gran Fury on behalf of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). The lack of visibility of HIV infected men and women during the AIDS crisis was a problem that ACT UP attempted to solve, citing President Reagan's denial of the crisis as a contributing factor. In the image, two men dressed as sailors passionately kiss each other with the text "READ MY LIPS," along with the details for an upcoming kiss-in (see Figure 11). The text is yet another intertextual link, this time to then-presidential candidate George H.W. Bush's iconic phrase, "Read my lips: no new taxes," from his speech during the Republican National Convention in 1988. The image and its accompanying text created an obvious visual dissonance that ACT UP was so adept at making.

Figure 12: Dmitri Vrubel, *My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love,* 1990

The artist, Dmitri Vrubel, also used the kissing image as a form of protest as well, emphasizing site specificity in his work. In 1990, he painted a mural called, "My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love." It was a reappropriation of an iconic photo depicting the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and East German leader Erich Honecker in a congratulatory kiss that he recontextualized with text. The photographer, Reggis Bossu, took the original photograph in 1977 at the end of Brezhnev's speech, which announced an agreement for mutual support between the nations. As indicative of the analogue tradition, this image exists in a place and Vrubel uses the emotional associations that are tied to the Berlin wall to augment the image and text. For today's viral image, conversely, the meme-generation deemphasizes physical place through the process of reproducing the image on a global scale. Digital reproduction eliminates an important element of tangibility and physical place, be it the Berlin wall or a museum, sacrificing aura for global ubiquity. A meme cannot be destroyed and is copied with only a couple keystrokes, making it near immortal and intangible. After all, Vrubel's mural was destroyed in 2009 by authorities, requiring the artist to repaint it. Thus, physical experience (Berlin wall, New York City streets, etc.) is deemphasized with the loss of Benjamin's aura, which has become a side effect of the meme phenomenon, adding yet another layer to the decentering of visual culture.

While ACT UP's significance was limited to New York City and Vrubel's mural remains part of the Berlin wall, powerful images and symbolic acts like Julia and Auriane's kiss are no longer created for and consumed in a specific physical place. The tools of protest are now appropriated by social networking, with many protesters using the meme to support and spread their viewpoints. The clash of ideologies has moved from the streets to the screens of computers and mobile phones. The meme generation has expanded the role of the image, by making the image not a thing, but an opportunity for sharing their own values and beliefs. Instead of using images for consumption, they are now used for personal expression. As we transition from a model of passive consumption, we now enter an era of active sharing, which is indicative of my conception of the visual trope. With this understanding, I appropriated a graphic design system in my next project to test my definition of a trope.

***Protest Trope Collages* — Description:**

Figure 13: The completed 25 *Protest Trope Collages*, 2012

Figure 14: Details from row five of the 25 *Protest Trope Collages*, 2012

Throughout my time in the program, I observed my MFA colleague Alice Willett approach pop culture in a methodology that seemed inverse to my own. She was less interested in establishing the categories of relationships that images can make with their texts than I had originally been. Instead she created image compositions through a generative system and analyzed the relationships post-rationally. But in this situation, the significance was not necessarily the resulting posters, but the system that made the posters. Willett's system became the designed artifact, much like Rubin's system for generating live texts, and the posters are a formal reflection of that system. Willett's systems approach to image communication liberated her from any theoretical paralysis, ushering in play and experimentation as a way to conduct design research. The constant emphasis on production, whether visually successful or not, was something I wanted to incorporate into my work. Therefore, I appropriated one of her generative systems and used it to visualize various protest tropes to test my understanding of the trope and break away from my usual methods of production.

Willett's generative system defines how form will be constructed by relying on a roll of the dice. Putting the formal decisions to chance liberated me to be able to sketch multitude visual relationships centering around protest imagery. Instead of deciding beforehand what the composition would look like and how it would communicate, I'd quickly sketch a multitude of visual relationships through her generative process as a method for experimentation. The only responsibility I had was to find sources for my content matter, which became the most important factor of the project. Therefore, I devised various parameters of sourcing imagery that I could quickly put through the generative system. I ran images through the system five times for each category, creating 25 posters total.

These parameters were as follows:

1. Image bank images (searching "protest" in www.dump.fm)
2. Twitter protest images (trending protest images on Twitter)

3. Submitted protest images (from my MFA colleague Isabel Paiva regarding Portuguese Eurozone protests)
4. Water cannon in protest (from my own collected images)
5. Same-sex kissing as protest (a subtrope that emerged from set 2)

With each successive run through the system, I clarified the work by becoming more specific with the type of visual trope I would search for and run through the system. Without knowledge at the time of the various kissing precedents I previously mentioned, I knew there was something significant about kissing as an act of protest, but didn't quite know why. In November 2012, the image of the French women kissing was being circulated through Twitter, and the Twicsy, a website that finds trending Twitter images, picked it up when I was completing this project. Twicsy found hundreds of retweets of this image, so many that it became difficult to find any other protest images.

I returned to this same-sex kissing trope for my fifth run through the generative system because I knew there was something significant about it. Thus, the parameter became highly specific: same-sex kissing as protest. This trope seemed highly important and timely for a number of reasons. Gay and lesbian visibility was a significant cultural issue and remains to be one. Twicsy reiterated the timeliness, after all. Additionally the past couple of years have been marked by the end of *Don't Ask Don't Tell*, global anti- and pro-gay marriage protests including the mentioned France, and the upcoming US Supreme court rulings over the validity of California's Proposition 8 and the federal government's Defense of Marriage Act.

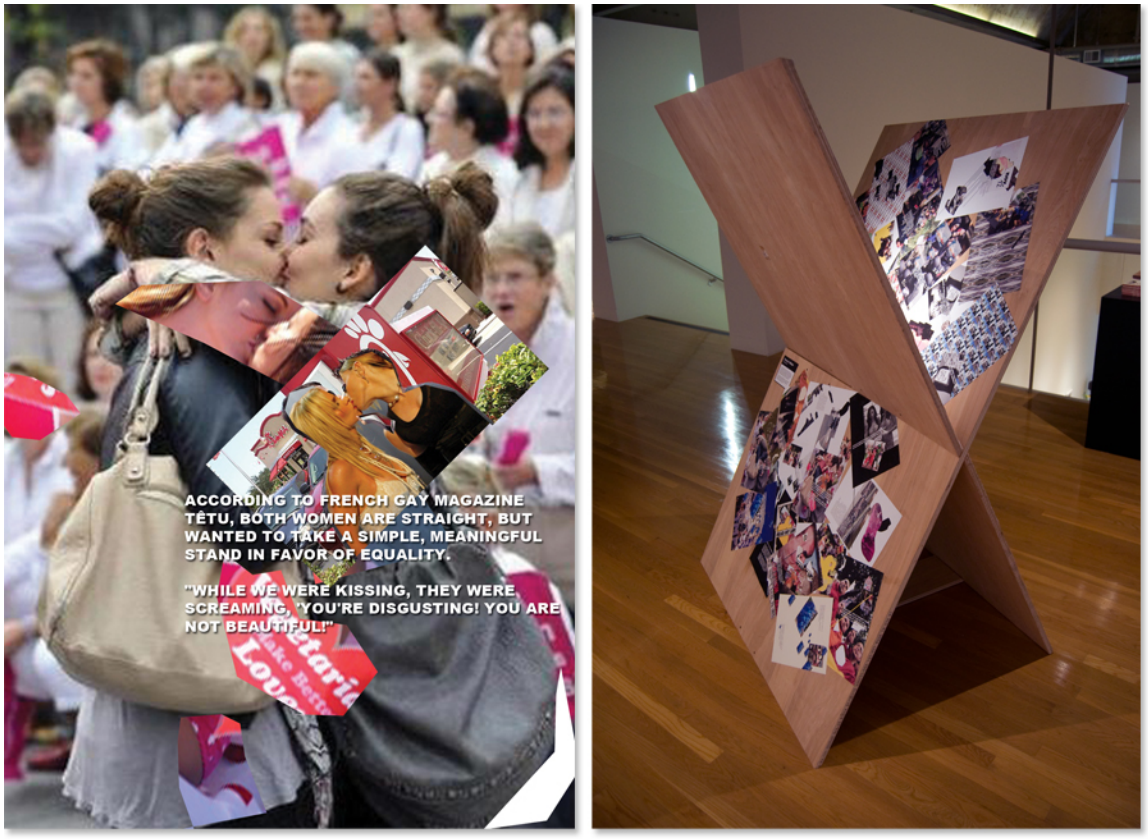


Figure 15: Protest trope detail, 2012 and MFA exhibition display, 2013

By putting images of same-sex kisses through the generative system, the systems began producing posters that had created visual dissonances. Posters, such as Figure 15, paired serious with frivolous pop culture images like Britney Spears and Madonna kissing, which were additionally framed by a Chick-fil-abackground, a contemporary kiss-in. The generative system would visualize extremes between the way the kiss is used, making the certain images seem more or less frivolous. Figure 15 also shows how the posters were wheatpasted onto a wooden structure for the master's exhibition. The "X" structure was created for the master's exhibition to show process posters, which is how I framed the work. They are process sketches because, through the process of making them, I narrowed down a single trope to expand upon in later projects. Opposite my work on the "X" are process sketches from my MFA colleague Hamed

Samadi, which showed his sketches for his orchid pots. This juxtaposition provided a nice contrast as to what process sketches can be for designers. Additionally, the "X" was created to break up the gallery space by inserting a large scale object to hold work.

The same-sex kiss, which emerged through the graphic system, became an important tool for pursuing equality as well as visibility for the gay community. Therefore, through this process, my working definition of visual trope became the following: the trope is a method of visual communication often used for symbolic purposes and is both dependent on formal as well as content repetition (in some capacity). A visual trope is a tool of a symbolic order. If isolated and expanded, it becomes one of the greatest methods available for the communication and realization of social issues.

While I don't believe this to be a successfully finalized project, this was an important project for me to establish my working terms and decide why it is I value collage and political imagery. An overarching question of "why?" seemed to guide much of my feedback for which I couldn't initially provide a satisfactory answer. But it seemed that instead of some fully finished poster series to be submitted to an exhibition, publication, or used in any applied setting, this project was far more about altering and challenging my more modernist understanding of graphic design, by embracing collage. I was creating relationships through chance without initially defining what that relationship would be. I felt that I was liberated from the rules that had been formally taught to me. I had mastered the hierarchical and modernist models of visual communication, and this new type of thinking emphasizing unexpected visual relationships challenged my conception of design—one that I was happy to experience. While the work may not fulfill my own expectations, the success of the project was measured by my personal growth. The "why" was then far less centered around the visual artifacts themselves and on the development of my critical practice, which would strongly inform the last few projects I would undertake in the program. This practice would be one that emphasized unexpected relationships

between form and content, subversive attitudes, and an overall idiosyncratic approach to visual communication.

***Meme Collages* — Precedent:**

Figure 16: Hannah Höch, *Bouquet of Eyes,* 1930

After both the *Hammer Project* and *Protest Collages* I began to embrace collage as a method that was able to critically intervene with visual culture. The method of collage, which Berlin Dadaists, and in particular Hannah Höch, first began to employ successfully during World War I, resulted in a liberation from old, ritualistic works of art by embracing and reappropriating the scraps of daily life. In my work, I've often been inspired by the Dada movement, which I assert was a prelude to Postmodernism. As a precedent, I looked Höch's works in collage and photomontage. In her many collages, she made surreal relationships between images, often augmenting the content to an absurd level and with a political agenda in mind relating to feminism and homosexuality.

Höch's *Bouquet of Eyes* (see Figure 16) is a wonderful example of her use of collage for a critical practice. As an example of her collaging in later years, she collected a multitude of different eyes and organized them together in a bouquet with its associations of marriage, femininity, and heterosexuality. Her use of collage in this case is an act of neutralizing gender by removing the eyes' surrounding context. It is impossible to determine the appropriated source of each eye based on the cut-up technique she employed.

I look to Höch not only because of her ability to create visually compelling collages, but because she did not shy away from addressing cultural topics through her work, which I found inspiring. I would similarly use collage to address issues of gay rights/visibility, acts of protest, and consumerism in the digital age. In my opinion, the following project, *Meme Collages*, is the most successful use of collage I employed, which created posters that augment and subvert contemporary tropes related to my chosen cultural topics.

***Meme Collages* — Description:**

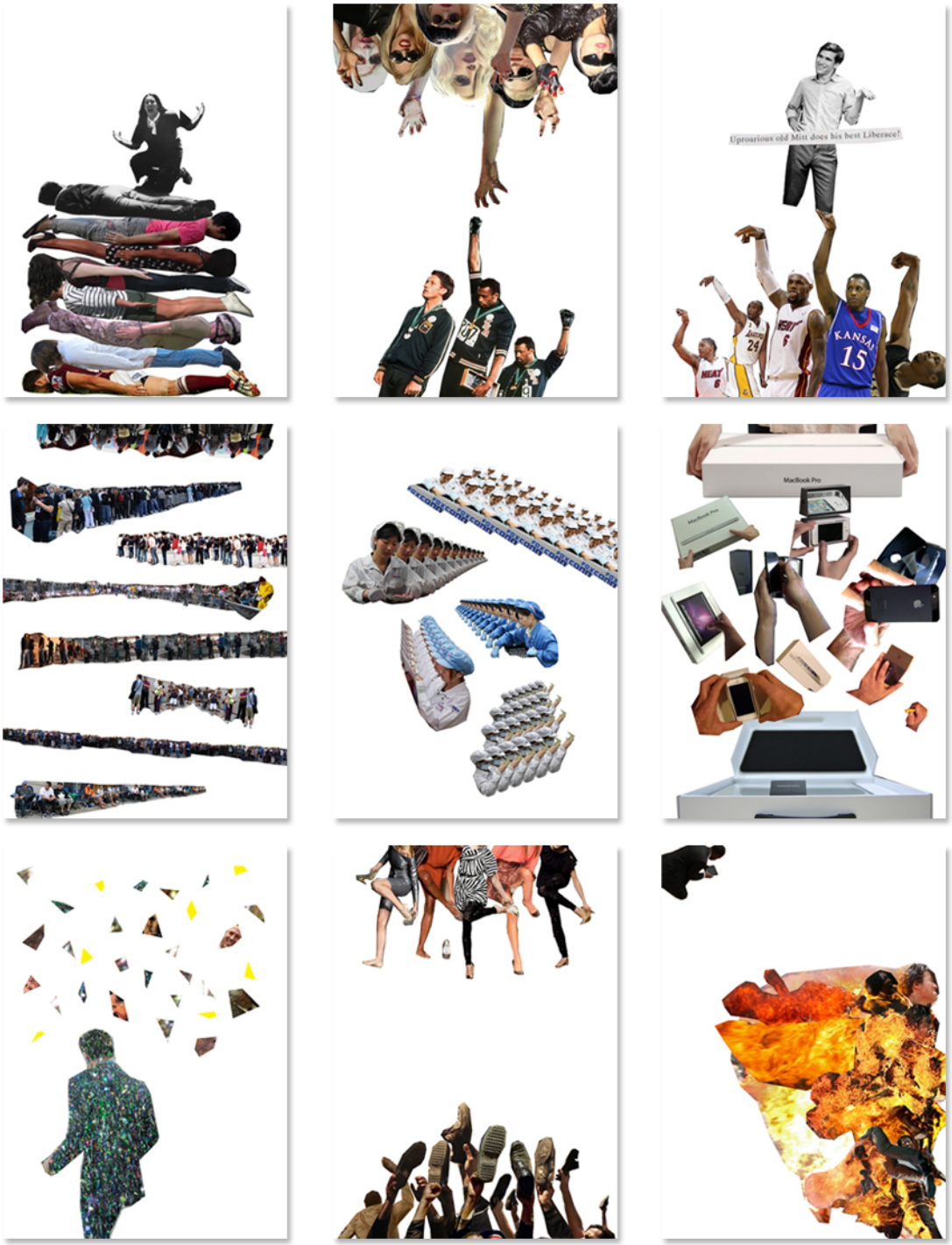


Figure 17: Sample from *Meme Collages*, 2013

Figure 18: Completed *Meme Collages* at master's exhibition, 2013

Meme Collages is a series of collage posters that aimed to augment and subvert contemporary trends in society. Originally the brief for this project was designed to be a daily practice, where I would make a collage each day regarding some trope I've observed in the media and use it as an opportunity critically intervene through collage. In the process of making the first collages, I realized each poster would take much more time to produce than I had originally intended. Therefore, I gave myself the goal of completing 30 collages before the master's exhibition, which I successfully completed. The content of the collages spanned various topics, but all were focused on contemporary trends that I felt required some level of criticism.

A sampling of the collages shows how I addressed issues of masculinity and gay identity (first row of Figure 17) through visual tropes, which included crossed legs, limped wrists, and advertisements that depict gay couples in stereotypical heterosexual scenes. I also addressed issues of consumerism (second row of Figure 17) through iPhone factory worker images, iPhone lines, and the trope of "unboxing" various electronics that can be seen on YouTube and tech

driven sites. I couldn't forget about protest tropes either (third row of Figure 17). That trope visualized through glitter-bombing (gay rights) using cut up images of conservative politicians like glitter, shoes used as protest in the Middle East paired with runway shoe models, and self-immolations paired with an iPad documenting the scene.

The way I used collage included visual augmentation (iPhone lines, Chinese factory workers) to create hyperbole, and visual dissonance (Mitt Romney's limp wrist paired with basketball players, shoes as protest in the Middle East paired with models taking off their shoes). Each trend required a different visual manipulation to incorporate my critical perspective, which was quite different from my *Protest Trope Posters*. This process was far more intentional and incorporated my voice and perspective more strongly as I was not relying on a system to produce the posters. But like the *Protest Trope Posters* and *Trope Collages* surrounding protest, martyrdom, crisis, and victory, *Meme Collages* used collage to critically engage with visual culture, make sense of it, and provide a critical contribution that aimed to augment or subvert the various social and political inequalities.

Once I completed 30 collages, the project was ready to be presented at the master's exhibition (see Figure 18), but I could have produced many more since new trends and memes continue to emerge almost daily. For me, the project was a process of collecting visual content from external sources and responding critically through my methods of appropriation, while also integrating my personal perspective. As a response to this project, I would, in my final projects, begin photographing my own images and collaging them, gaining additional control, while also losing an element of immediate identification that these memes already have.

***Mannequin Stock Images* — Precedent:**

Figure 19: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still, #21,* 1978

As mentioned, my practice has moved along a spectrum from a traditional modernist design practice emphasizing structure in visual communication to a postmodern practice emphasizing reappropriation and unexpected relationships between form. As part of this second type of practice, I have looked to the photographer Cindy Sherman whose work effectively uses tropes to expose how our image world, and in her case film, is constructed by them. By looking to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills,* I have identified her practice as part of a new era of creatives who disregard Benjamin's concept of the "aura" in celebration for the multitude of copies and remixes that work to shatter identity, rational models of communication, and univocal meanings.

Each film still in the series presents an image of a female heroine (always herself) in some type of role that is reminiscent of a film (see Figure 19). The actual film remains ambiguous from the lack of any informing caption as she recreates a memory of a nonexistent film and uses generic tropes to do so. While produced in 1977-80, her film stills were first introduced to me in David Harvey's "Condition of Postmodernity,"[18] where he describes the use

18. Harvey, "Condition of Postmodernity."

of herself in these multifarious roles as a fragmentation of her identity. She can take on any role, be any person in any place she wants by building upon the foundation of these generic film tropes. This is an obvious similarity to the image of two women kissing in Marseille, where viewers care very little of the specifics of the image and more about the representation itself.

Upon looking closer at the *Untitled Film Series*, it's clear that content matters very little in the series, which relies heavily on repetition of generic tropes. There isn't a particular message that Sherman wishes a viewer to receive, because the viewer can use any number of individual contextual cues to assemble some type of meaning. Perhaps in Figure 19, the woman is on her first day of work as secretary or perhaps it is the start of a romantic film. Because it doesn't depict an actual film, but still operates as if it is an actual film still, Sherman reveals how our visual culture is constructed through visual tropes. Instead of feeling paralyzed, cultural creators such as Sherman have used visual tropes to their advantage to re-imagine a new world out of scraps from the old. Progress, in this case, takes a much less linear approach and instead, through unique combinations and re-creations she builds upon an inextricably linked visual culture. One thread cannot be pulled without untangling the entire structure that is the intertextual web of recurring tropes.

***Mannequin Stock Images* — Description:**

Figure 20: Completed M*annequin Stock Images*, 2013

When I was planning my work for the master's exhibition, I wanted to create a project that conveyed to gallery viewers the significance of tropes in visual culture. To accomplish this, I created a toolbox of stock tropes that recreated contemporary images that have been used prominently in visual culture. The project, *Mannequin Stock Images,* was based off the tropes I had worked on in the past and depicted 12 images grouped into three tropes: stock grief, stock conflict, and stock passion. Informed by both Sherman's photography and my own usage of stock photography in the *Hammer Project*, the *Mannequin Stock Images* were created to communicate how images operate in our culture. In line with Barthes' belief, I assert that images are not consumed for their specific informational content but operate as stock ideas.

After my *Meme Collages*, which centered around collecting already existing imagery, I decided to photograph my own images, but I needed figures that were inherently neutral, like those in stock photography. To create them, I arranged and photographed a mannequin, which is a neutral and adaptable figure. Using a mannequin form, I was able to generate my chosen stock tropes of grief, conflict, and passion by emphasizing gestural form. The mannequin photos were left in the most basic unit of a trope, which focused on foreground relationships, thus illustrating how these tropes are the building blocks of symbolic communication (see Figure 20). For the exhibition however, each stock image also included its original news headline to indicate the range of contexts these tropes exist in. I wanted there to be a clear relationship with the actual way images are used in both the media and social networking and the headlines helped accomplish that.

The tropes were selected for their meme-like qualities—their ability to spread on a massive scale through social networking. Stock grief covered issues from financial crisis to martyrdom. Stock conflict depicted social conflicts in the form of Occupy Wall Street pepper spray incidents to protestors that were blasted by water in Uganda. Stock passion recreated seemingly passionate moments, whether it be the two kissing French women I have mentioned

before or of President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama sharing a moment on the kiss cam at a basketball game. The point of creating multiple stock passion images, for example, was that they all referred to the same trope, the kiss, although they may drastically differ in meaning and resist univocal interpretations. Stock passion can show a range of content from the Chick-fil-A kiss-in to the Obamas kissing, from anti-gay rallies in France to kissing during the 2011 riots in Vancouver. Their specific meaning is achieved through their context, which in the case of this project came in the form of a newspaper headline that I hung below each mannequin image. By creating these stock images, I was able to communicate how often our visual culture is constructed out of trope-like representations. After the project was completed, I was left with a toolbox for symbolic image communication that could be added on to, modified, and recontextualized.

Of all the tropes I had created and examined, I felt the kissing trope was the most powerful. From mannequin kisses to gay kisses, from straight kisses to presidential kisses, this trope remains a significant symbolic force in culture. Because of that, I was excited to use it for my final project, *Live Twitter Projection—Kiss,* which embraced a decentered approach to communication by using time-based media. As the final project, it created a full circle from where I originally had begun. I was once again considering what I had learned from Olsen's model for image-text relationships and I was once again looking to Rubin's work for innovative ways of expressing the cultural impact of the kissing trope.

Live Twitter Projection - Kiss* — Description*:

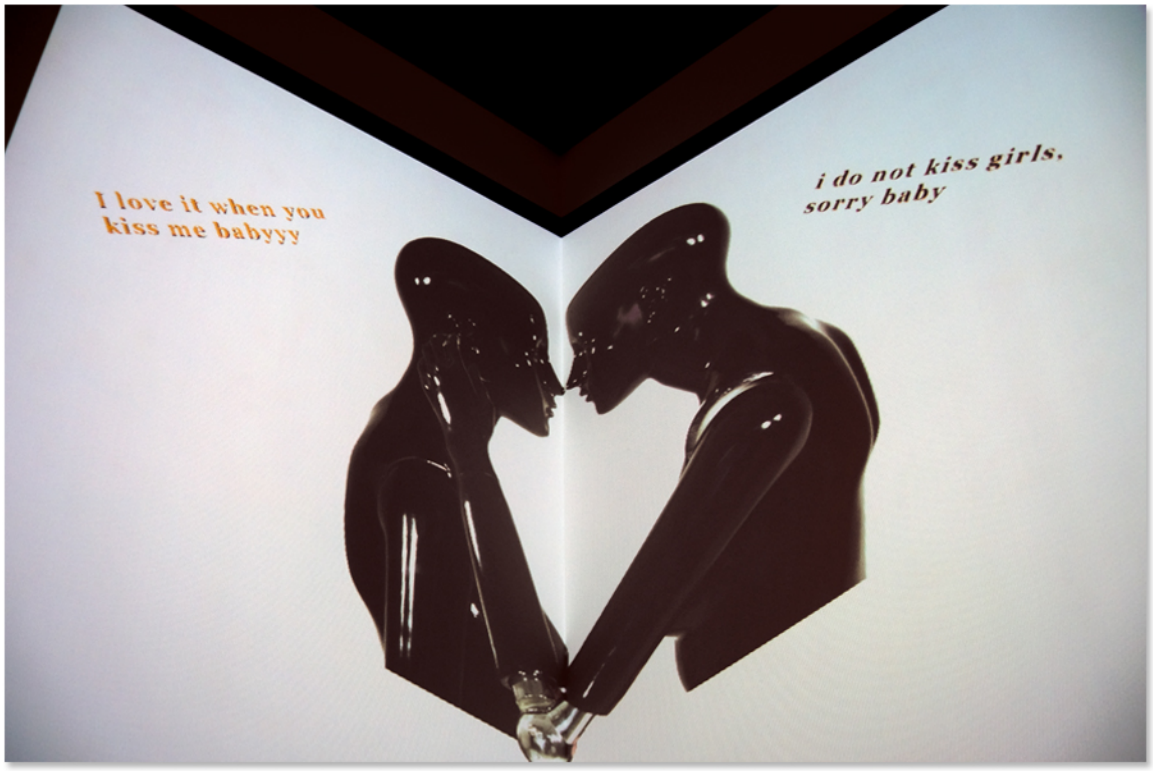


Figure 21: Completed *Live Twitter Projection – Kiss,* 2013

In previous projects, I had been focusing on the kissing trope as a method for activist purposes, primarily for gay rights and gay visibility. However, I wanted to contextualize the stock passion image, the kissing trope, in the much broader culture in order to create a decentered approach to image-text relationships. Therefore, with a gallery audience in mind, I created a dynamic Twitter visualizer, which generated a multitude of rhetorical frames in the form of tweets for the stock passion image.

As an installation at the Visual Arts Center, it was important for the project to be digital because the system was relying on live tweets. Because the project emphasized a back-and-forth conversation between the mannequins, I decided to display the work in a corner between two walls, so a projection became necessary. Having two feeds allowed for a never-ending

conversation to occur between the two mannequins. For the projection, these two different streams of communication were differentiated by their colors as well as their placements. I chose to display the incoming tweets near the heads of the mannequins to act as speech bubbles.

The dynamic texts provided a fleeting understanding of the image until being replaced by a new tweet, which all contained the word "kiss." This process infinitely recontextualized what was seen, creating a never to be defined image-text relationship. As a decentered approach, the process of generating an infinite amount of texts containing the keyword kiss provided an ever elusive understanding of the kissing trope. The lack of singular meaning became a central, postmodern principle that I adopted into my practice. In my work, no longer is there a singular message to be communicated but rather an ever-changing expression of thought. The project's almost voyeuristic display provided a glimpse as to how Twitter users used the keyword and, taking another step, I have applied those feelings to the stock image I have created, much in the same way I did with the soldier in my *First Iteration Projection*. It is important to note that digital reproduction allows for this type of decentering to occur. I would argue Twitter, when used in this manner, provides a never-ending stream of information that creates unintended links between image and text.

Like Rubin's large installation, *And That's the Way It Is,* it was important that my project be experienced in person. A photograph of the work (see Figure 21) is a reproduction that isn't able to show much of why this project is significant. The live component is completely removed and it begins to resemble a typical image-text composition, which is contrary to my objective. Therefore, a gallery setting made sense for the *Live Twitter Projection—Kiss* to live in because viewers would hopefully experience quality of light, the shadows created when people walked in front of it, the scale in proportion to humans, and, most importantly, the live component. None of those factors are evident in a reproduction of the project, which perhaps argues that the aura is something still to be valued. Upon reflection, I realized in the process of exploiting digital

technologies by reassigning Twitter feeds to my images, I created a piece that still must be experienced like a painting by limiting its impact to a specific area.

The texts projected expressed a range of emotions from indifference to hatred to jealousy to ecstasy and love. My belief is that creating a system that communicates uncertainty and contradictory feelings can be a very viable option in an experimental practice. While it clashed with a more traditional, modernist approach to design, these ambivalent relationships between the image and texts were more important to me than communicating a clear and unchanging understanding of what was seen. The project reappropriated social networking technologies to communicate the complexity of our visual culture to a gallery audience in a visually compelling manner.

CONCLUSION

Image communication is a complex field that has only grown more intricate with the introduction of social networking technologies. I believe the works in this report have rigorously addressed issues in contemporary communication and better defined visual rhetoric for future practitioners. I also believe that I have creatively challenged the cultural assumptions of my viewers through the various methods I have described. While it may not always be stated clearly, my intention has been to make issues of social and political inequality visible for viewers of my work. The type of content I have chosen has been a reflection of my personal values and, through the process of creating the work, I have been allowed to share my beliefs regardless if the viewer agrees with the perspective or not. That is the power of a critical practice, which has allowed me to communicate a perspective that was once insular. My critical practice in visual rhetoric is not based on a problem-solution process, but a reflection of my values and beliefs regarding social and political equality.

My time in the graduate program was an opportunity for me to strengthen my voice both as a cultural critic and cultural producer. In having my suppositions questioned and challenged, the values I originally held upon entering graduate school have only grown stronger and more deeply ingrained. While my values never changed, my methodology did, which allowed me to become much more conscious of my impact as a graphic designer. By considering visual rhetoric as a mode of inquiry, I have developed an approach that can used to pursue any number of endeavors long after I have completed the MFA program.

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